DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 199 165 SO 013 227

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TITLE Imperatives for Tomorrow: The I's Have It: Images, Institutions, Involvement. Paper P-87.
INSTITUTION Institute for the Future, Menlo Park, Calif.
PUB DATE 20 Jul 80
NOTE 10p.; For related documents, see SO 013 225-228. Prepared for the Global Conference on the Future (1st, Toronto, Canada, July 20-24, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Images; *Futures (of Society); Organizational Effectiveness; Organizational Objectives; *Research Needs; Social Attitudes; Social Change; Social Isolation; Social Planning; Social Sciences

ABSTRACT

Realizing that the driving force within any society for thinking constructively about the future is usually an image of what that future is or should be, this paper evaluates the nature and variety of images held in modern society. The hypothesis is that the ease with which images of all kinds are generated, transmitted, and received has led to image, information, and sensory overload. One major result of this overload is that it has become increasingly difficult to achieve consensus on any issue. Examples of this lack of consensus include agitation based on economic, political, and cultural differences between and among regional areas; conflict between urban and rural interests; struggles for power among ethnic and racial groups; and conflicts of interest between rich and poor. A major way in which futures studies can offer guidance to help sort out images in a meaningful way is to help policy makers set priorities. Among the priorities stressed by futures studies which can be helpful in this regard are learning to generate images that are better matched and more relevant to issues, becoming more selective in sharing images, learning to coalesce private images so that they can become guidelines for action, recognizing the need to create new organizations whose functions and objectives do not conflict with existing institutions, working to improve articulation among institutions' structures and functions, stressing the importance of long-term objectives, establishing adequate measures of social accountability, and accomodating individual desires for direct involvement in social decision making. (DB)

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IMPERATIVES FOR TOMORROW

The I's Have It:
Images, Institutions, Involvement

by

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prepared for

The First Global Conference on The Future
Toronto, Canada
July 20-24, 1980

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July 20, 1980

Paper P-87

SP 013 227

IMPERATIVES FOR TOMORROW

The I's Have It: Images, Institutions, Involvement

Society today is beset by too many images, too few institutional innovations, and too much participatory noise.

Images

The driving force for thinking constructively about the future is usually an "image." Fred Polak has succinctly stated in "The Image of the Future" that

> "Any student of the rise and fall of cultures cannot fail to be impressed by the role played in this historical succession by the image of the future. The rise and fall of images precede or accompany the rise and fall of cultures."

In this sense, images of the future are synonomous with the set of assumptions we hold about the nature of humankind and the role of the individual in society. They include both public (that is, shared) images and private images. But in spite of their central role in shaping events, we know very little about the dynamics of image formation, sharing, and transmission. We do not know exactly how images affect individual and social behavior. We do not know why they sometimes lead and sometimes lag behind cultural development. And we do not know how amenable they may be to study and analysis. Yet images of the future are so central to the progress of society that an understanding of the dynamics of their formation and renewal is essential.

Some--Polak in particular--have suggested that perhaps our collective ability to generate compelling images of the future has diminished. In fact, just the opposite

may be true. I would propose that the ease with which images of all kinds are now generated, transmitted, and received has led to "image overload" as well as information or sensory overload.

Rising levels of education, dramatic increases in the amount and speed of information transmission of all kinds, the ease of travel, and the explosive growth of print and broadcast media have collectively immersed us in a sea of competing and often conflicting images. The result, in most instances, is a fragmentation and splitting of society into groups, subgroups, and sub-subgroups--almost ad infinitum. One result is that the difficulties of achieving consensus on practically anything have multiplied manyfold.

The effects are being felt worldwide. Virtually every country is experiencing the pressures of ethnicity or regionalization--for example, the U.K. (devolution), Canada (Quebec), the U.S. (Northeast versus Southwest) as well as many developing countries. And within the U.S., for example, such moves for greater independence or separation can be felt at many state levels (urban versus rural) and even within cities (poor versus rich, black versus white). At a time when the critical problems facing us all cry out for unity of purpose, we often find ourselves in states of catatonic immobility--not because we don't know what to do, but because we can't resolve the conflict of competing alternatives stemming from competing images.

Some might suggest that it is neither too few nor too many images, but the lack of the right kind of images. We have too many "I" and "me" rather than "us" and "we" images. And, indeed, this may be so.

In any case, high on the priority list of imperatives I would place the following three: We must learn to generate images that are <u>better matched</u> or more relevant to the issues we now face. We must learn how to be <u>more selective</u> in sharing images without at the same time restricting access to them. And we must learn how to <u>coalesce private images</u> so that they can become guidelines for action. In short, we must quickly

learn how to cope with a rich variety of images without the accompanying divisiveness that often makes consensus elusive.

I know of no efforts, large or small, to raise our understanding of the role of images in social change processes to the level of our understanding of the use of expert judgment, probabilistic distributions, and modeling. This is a societal imbalance that needs to be righted as quickly as possible.

Institutions

Compounding our difficulties with image overload is the growing inability of our societal institutions to adapt effectively to change. It should not be surprising then to find that one of the most persistent social trends of recent years has been the pervasive distrust of institutions of all kinds. This mind set is not limited to particular social groups since it appears to include rich and poor, young and old, urban and rural, black and white. Nor is the trend limited to particular institutions since it includes government, business, the military, labor unions, universities, the media, and even the churches.

What possible explanations can we advance for the presence of this deep-seated loss of confidence in institutions of all kinds? Allow me to speculate on the following set of six institutional characteristics that may provide some clues.

First, new institutions are created without dismantling the old. As a result, there is an overlapping of functions and a blurring of jurisdictions. Creating a multiplicity of organizations or agencies with conflicting objectives and purposes is probably more flagrant and common in the public than in the private sector, although neither can claim to be entirely innocent.

Second, inadequate articulation exists among institutions' purposes, functions, and structures. Our understanding of the ways in which the structures of institutions can be shaped to best match their purposes is indeed primitive. The tendency is to

slip into the familiar military-like or pyramidal structures with vertical chains of command and a line/staff division of functions. But these are often ill-suited to the needs of present-day societal stakeholders.

Third, as institutions mature, they tend to grow unwieldy and inefficient. Most organizations are keenly sensitive to the problems that can result from this growth--most notably, poor communications and a diminishing capacity to be responsive. As a result, some steps have been taken to decentralize into autonomous or semiautonomous operating units. Furthermore, the recent economic downturn has forced many organizations to pare activities down to leaner and more efficient sizes. However, generally--with some notable exceptions--the size of many institutions (i.e., organizations) has grown beyond that justified by economies of scale.

Fourth, control of institutions typically becomes vested in people who achieve positions of power by virtue of seniority or tenure. As this occurs, resistance to change and innovation increases proportionately. The problem is likely to be aggravated even more by the expected "management glut" of the late '80s, as more and more aspirants to management positions vie for relatively fewer opportunities.

Fifth, internal incentive structures are such that long-range goals are severely compromised to short-term objectives. This observation is as true in the private sector, where management career paths are tied to short-term performance, as it is in the public sector, where time horizons are proscribed by terms of office. In an analogy of Gresham's Law, short-term problems generally drive out long-term planning. As a result, managers tend to "squeeze out" the maximum short-term gains in each position as they move through organizations, usually by sacrificing important long-term benefits or, alternatively, by incurring implicit long-term costs.

Sixth and finally, few adequate measures of social accountability exist for judging institutional performance. After more than a decade of rhetoric about corporate social responsibility, real questions can still be raised about the practicality or reality of

the concept. It has been particularly elusive to define, and little progress has been made other than to recognize that tough problems must be confronted to develop and apply useful social measures.

This litany of institutional deficiencies is familiar to most of you. Also familiar perhaps is the sledgehammer approach we have taken to cope with such deficiencies. First we try to "sunshine" our public institutions, hoping that wider knowledge and exposure of their activities will lead to self-reform. When we tire of "sunshine," we "sunset" our institutions; that is, we establish them for limited lifetimes so that their period of obsolescence can be sharply curtailed. When we shy away from "sunset" laws because of the practical problems of implementation, we look for new ways to "bypass" institutions by creating all kinds of duplicate structures. Thus, at a variety of levels in the public and private sectors, we seem to be suffering from a massive poverty of innovative institutional ideas for achieving social purposes.

What may be needed here is something akin to a network of institutional development and testing laboratories for evolving and evaluating radically new structures and processes. Virtually every feature of institutional design needs to be agonizingly reappraised: form (profit, nonprofit, other), structure (formal, informal), incentive and rewards (short term versus long term), management roles ("left" versus "right" brain), and measures of performance (economic versus social). These features must be considered, singly and together, in terms of present and expected functions and purposes to be served. For example, organizationally, we need to look for new ways to meet the needs of skilled versus unskilled workers, part-time versus full-time employees, young versus older managers, consultants versus professional staff. Nationally, we need to find radically new ways to fashion management-government-labor cooperative arrangements for doing business in an increasingly international setting. And internationally, we need to develop a range of innovative institutions for accommodating the needs of Third World countries for access to resources, technologies, and specific management skills.

In a very real sense we should strive to become as innovative in designing institutions as we have been in developing new technologies. It may not be too farfetched to consider allocating as much of society's resources to purposeful institutional design and assessment as to performing technology and social assessments, but with one major caveat: I would not suggest institutionalizing the process into an Office of Institutional Assessment! Again, I know of no efforts addressing those issues. They require an amalgam of talents--conceptual and pragmatic as well as organizational and political.

Involvement

As our societal images have become less compelling and our institutions less responsive, we have turned increasingly to one of the few alternatives left: direct involvement in choices affecting us. This phenomenon is fairly diffuse and difficult to describe. It has many dimensions and many faces: Among the rubrics used are "crisis of governance," the "participation revolution," the "rise of participatory democracy." Let's examine just three of these dimensions.

For most of its 200 years, the U.S. has operated within a political system that may be described as "representative democracy." In most instances, citizens have been willing to entrust their elected representatives with the power for making choices on local and national issues. However, as societal institutions have come increasingly under fire, this trust has been gradually withdrawn. Individuals and groups have emerged that demand to make their preferences felt more directly rather than through elected representatives. The use of direct action--lobbying, direct mail, forming one-issue groups--has become endemic. The result has not only been a considerable increase in the complexity of decision making, but many processes have literally become "hung up" by our inability to cope with the proliferation of actions and inputs.

This is a new phenomenon. And, on the surface, increased participation through direct action even seems like a healthy development. But democratic political systems

are very fragile mechanisms. And our experience with real participatory democracy is practically nil. Some astute students of political processes have speculated that we do not really know how to accommodate the needs of a truly participatory democracy. Furthermore, the observation has been made that the stability of prior democratic institutions depended heavily on the considerable disinterest of a large segment of the electorate. Whether or not this is true, the fact is that we are experiencing increasing difficulties in participatory governance.

The demand for more direct participation does not spring solely from institutional distrust and failure. An interesting relationship may also exist between growing participation and the "growth versus less (or, in the extreme, no) growth" controversy. As economic growth slows (as it inevitably will for at least the next five years), more attention will be focused on the distribution of that growth among different groups in society. In turn, this shift of attention will surely result in increasing pressure to move the locus of such choices from the economic arena (where we operate essentialy on "one dollar, one vote") to the political arena (where the governing principle is "one person, one vote"). Thus, what may have formerly been primarily economic choices now become transformed into largely political choices. Some observers have even gone so far as to conjecture that without healthy economic growth, political democracies are not viable since the conflicts of distribution issues will overwhelm the delicate apparatus of democratic decision making.

There is still another important dimension to this "direct participation" or "direct involvement" puzzle. Computer/communication technologies (e.g., TV, opinion polling) have already begun to change the basic relationships of citizens to their political parties, their elected representatives, and their public institutions. The mediating roles that such institutions formerly played have been weakened considerably by the more direct access that electronic media provide. And the end is not in sight, as our capability for instant referenda grows and as the opportunities for more direct involvement in expressing preferences diffuse through society.

Of the three imperatives that I consider crucial to the health of our collective futures, the third--learning how to make participatory governance work--may be the most important of all. We must learn to resolve the hang-ups, delays, stalemates, and counterproductive adversarial stances that plague almost all of our national and global issues. We must increasingly shift our focus to new forms of bargaining, negotiation, conflict resolution--often cutting across cultures as well as diverse groups within the same culture.

Happily, some stirrings of life along these lines are beginning to be felt. For example, a number of organizations and groups are springing up in both the public and private sectors whose sole purpose is precisely to discover and apply new ways of joint problem solving, achieving consensus, negotiating, bargaining, and resolving conflicts. Also, more interest is being shown by an increasing number of anthropologists and communication researchers in ways of overcoming barriers to cross-cultural communication.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, I believe the principal imperatives for tomorrow are the three critical I's: developing a few powerful guiding images, creating a variety of dramatically new institutions to meet the needs of stakeholders, and devising innovative ways of accommodating the desire for direct involvement in societal decision making. The quality of our future largely rests on these three I's, and on how well we satisfy them.